Blog posts

Tower of Babel

A Brussels diary: Part 5

Ahead of the European elections on 22 May, Betto van Waarden describes the daily routine of decision-making in Brussels.

Exclusive 19 May, by Betto van Waarden

Part 1 : Gone Fishin'
Part 2 : Brussels requires a strong stomach
Part 3 : The EU family
Part 4 : Europe's fourth power
Part 6 : Pass it on
Part 7 : Theatre of the absurd

We used to play a game in primary school where we sat in a circle and passed around a message by whispering in each other's ears. The message the last child heard wasn't a bit like the original. The more children between, the more the message was unconsciously distorted. At the conference table of the Council of the European Union I felt like I was back in that circle.

The first time I had to edit the speeches of the European Commissioner for education and culture for a meeting with EU education ministers, I spent hours evaluating words to find the most punchy phrases in English, until a colleague said: "Oh, don't worry about specific formulations; the speeches will be translated multiple times and any poetic subtleties will be lost." He was right. A speech in English we delivered to our Cypriot European Commissioner was sometimes first translated into Cypriot Greek by her staff; as she read it at the meeting, a Cypriot interpreter translated it back to English; then the other interpreters translated the English translation into the other EU languages (24, although never all available at the same meeting), which ministers listened to on their headsets. I listened to the English interpretation (only two relays) and while the main ideas were the same, the English was quite different from the original speech.

The distortion through consecutive translations is sometimes aggravated by a speaker who doesn't start with a clear message. The first time I had to report on a meeting at the European Parliament, I was stressed. I had to note what the Europarliamentarians thought of our Commission proposal for the new EU culture programme Creative Europe, but what the Italian Europarliamentarian said didn't make any sense to me. I thought it must be the English interpretation, so I listened to the Dutch and German translations, which didn't

help. Eventually I just jotted down in my empty notepad a few random words I caught. Afterwards a colleague asked: "Did you understand that? I listened directly to the Italian, but I have no idea what she was trying to say." I sighed in relief—it wasn't me. But I felt for the poor interpreters, who spent an hour desperately trying to make something out of the confused Italian story. The Commission still didn't really know what the Parliament thought of its €1.8 billion proposal.

Confusion also arises when states discuss the English working documents that form the basis of legislative texts. (Generally only original policy proposals and final legal texts are translated into all 24 languages.) The countries' representatives understand the same English words differently and try to reconcile these differences by communicating with each other in their own national languages via interpretation. There are further problems when the final English texts need to be translated into the other languages. The words "student" and "literacy" have slightly different meanings in French and Spanish than they do in English, so clarifying the intended meaning of a legal document and finding the right translation requires further debates and the assistance of jurists/linguists. (The EU is the world's largest employer of interpreters and translators: DG Translation produced over 2 million pages of translation in 2013.)

The translations can come in handy. When someone speaks too fast or mumbles you can just listen to a clearer version in a different language. Or a friendlier version. The German chair of the Parliament's committee on culture and education is in her seventies, was once a teacher, and has her heart set on good education and jobs for young Europeans. Consequently, she has little patience for her colleagues and even less for the Commission. Fortunately there is English interpretation, so I can listen to a calm, polite British voice as I watch her on her elevated chairwoman seat when she occasionally rages in German and gestures vehemently towards the Commission.

The translation excuse sometimes offers a great way out during meetings of the member states at the Council of the EU. When the German attaché disliked the argument of his Portuguese colleague and grimaced, he pointed to his headset afterwards as if to say "I think it was just the interpretation," preventing Germany from accidentally offending Portugal. A Dutch diplomat took a controversial stance in a characteristic direct manner. When she didn't get a response, she irritably asked her Slovakian neighbour: "Was there a problem with the interpretation?" The Slovakian shrugged innocently, masking the fact that the problem was not the interpretation but that most other countries disagreed.

These diplomats talk English during coffee breaks and lunch. And French in the elevators. By tradition, everyone greets each other with a "bonjour" when

entering the elevator and says goodbye with a “bonne journée” on getting out. But an attaché who accidentally speaks English during a meeting will be immediately reprimanded by a colleague from the national ministry. She is supposed to honour national pride and cultural diversity by speaking her own language. The English in the hallways and cafeteria is Eurospeak, a Brussels language with influences from different EU languages. You can usually guess quickly where someone comes from. East Europeans often don’t use articles, southern Europeans sometimes use plural forms of adjectives that don’t exist in English. As Eurospeak assumes a life of its own, the Commission warns its employees by circulating a list of incorrectly used English.

The most absurd situations happen when an attaché tries to bridge cultural and linguistic differences with humour. Humour conveys amiability — a tricky message at a meeting in 24 languages with their own cultures. When someone cracks a joke, other diplomats react in four waves: those who understand the original language laugh immediately; those who are listening to the English interpretation laugh two seconds later; those who listen to an interpretation based on the English version laugh two seconds after that. The rest look around in bewilderment: they’ve heard the interpretation but don’t have enough shared cultural references to get the joke.

If Brussels feels like the new Babel, it’s still an impressive achievement that 28 countries with 24 languages manage to cooperate on so many complex policy issues.